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Nurses 'crushed' over Carcieri veto on overtime bill

The governor wants the issue of forced overtime negotiated through collective bargaining.

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PROVIDENCE — Governor Carcieri angered and disappointed nurses across the state yesterday with his veto of a bill that would bar hospitals from forcing nurses to work overtime.

"I think we're all feeling kind of crushed," said Barbara Hunger, a registered nurse at Women & Infants Hospital. Hunger said she and a group of nurses had met with the governor's policy staff a day earlier to urge him to sign the bill rather than merely letting it become law without his signature, as he does with the vast majority of bills. Hunger said they knew a veto might be in the cards, but had remained optimistic.

Said state Sen. John J. Tassoni Jr., D-Smithfield, who sponsored the measure in the Senate, "I'm just so upset that he would do something like this."

The governor vetoed the House bill, sponsored by Rep. Raymond

E. Gallison Jr., D-Bristol. Carcieri has yet to act on the Senate version, which was not given to him until Thursday, the legislative data system shows. The governor's office is still reviewing the mounds of bills that were passed in the session's final days, and the House and Senate just finished transmitting bills yesterday.

Carcieri wrote in his veto message that forced overtime is something that "should be negotiated through the collective-bargaining process."

The bill's backers begged to differ. Hospitals such as Our Lady of Fatima and Kent Hospital, where nurses are not unionized, can't negotiate their working conditions collectively. "They don't have a voice, and they were hoping the General Assembly would be their voice," Tassoni said.

Carcieri also claimed the bill would worsen the shortage of nurses in Rhode Island because hospitals would need to hire people to fill shifts they could previously have filled through overtime. Gallison said that argument, too, was misguided. He said nurs-

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es finishing their training and looking for jobs would be drawn to Rhode Island if they knew they couldn't be forced to work back-to-back shifts on a regular basis.

"We do have a severe nursing shortage," Gallison said. "This is one of the reasons."

Gallison noted that the bill passed unanimously, with bipartisan support.

Legislative leaders have not said yet whether they will return to override vetoes before the new session begins, in January. Tassoni, Gallison and Hunger all said they would be pushing for that.

The mandatory-overtime bill was one of four bills the governor vetoed late this week. Carcieri also nixed the Assembly's efforts to require insurers to bear part of the burden of hospitals' bad debt; to create a state Department of Veterans' Affairs; and to apply equal-opportunity and affirmative-action laws to the governor's appointments to boards and commissions.

The hospital-debt bill would have forced insurers to compensate hospitals for a portion of the copays and deductibles that hospitals are unable to collect. Carcieri objected to the bill in part because it would levy a new 3-percent "bed tax" on hospital services.

The tax lawmakers proposed "will undoubtedly lead to increasing the overall cost of health care," Carcieri wrote. "These costs will eventually be passed on to consumers, making health care more expensive to the consumer and resulting in an increase in the number of uninsured."

Regarding the proposed creation of a Department of Veterans' Affairs — a bill sponsored by Rep. Kenneth Carter, D-North Kingstown — Carcieri wrote: "I do not believe ... that establishing yet another new bureaucracy — especially one as carelessly crafted as the one called for in this bill — does anything to assist Rhode Island's veterans."

Regarding subjecting gubernatorial appointments to boards and commissions to equal-opportunity and affirmative-action laws — a bill sponsored by Rep. Joseph S. Almeida, D-Providence — Carcieri said he did not veto the bill out of a lack of support for those laws. Rather, he said those laws were meant to apply to paid, not volunteer, positions. He also said the bill would entangle the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights in the gubernatorial-appointment process by allowing the board to reject appointments. "The Senate" — which gives advice and consent to the governor's nominations — "can reject appointments that fail to reflect the diversity of our state," Carcieri wrote.

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